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I want to tell you more about the photographs which were kept in that document box at the top of my parents' wardrobe. It was only possible to see them when my father unlocked the box for some purpose, so they were rarely looked at. For this reason, these photographs were alluring and strangely...fresh...as though their dark, un contemplated existence had saved them somehow, spared them the experience of disappearing into the world of everyday images, of being worn out by looking. These were the photographs of my mother and her family in Russia, inhabiting that unimaginable time and place before my own existence.

I have one of them here with me now. It is not the one I love best (not, in other words, one of the pictures of my baby mother); it is a studio portrait of my grandfather and an unknown young man. My grandfather is sitting, both hands anchoring his inverted hat firmly in his lap. He is wearing a thick tweedy suit of the sort that English country gentlemen used to sport, the kind that has a pleated breast pocket with a button-down flap. His face is turned carefully towards the camera, his dark features grave and unsmiling. The unknown young man stands to his left. He looks slightly overwhelmed by the formality of the old-fashioned collar and tie occasion. I notice that, even though he cannot be much more than nineteen, his hairline is receding and he already has less hair than my grandfather. I say that this young man is unknown to me, but that is not strictly true. I have an idea that he is a relative of my grandfather's, possibly a nephew. All the people who could tell me his name are long dead.

And because they are dead, he is dead, too, at least to me. Nevertheless, I have often wondered whether this photograph exists somewhere else, carefully labelled on the back with both the names of its subjects. Recently I have come to realise that this kind of fantasy is shared by many people. On the Net there is a website, a sort of limbo of lost photographs, in which the faces of countless people stare out, waiting to be recognised. They come from places like Lemberg, Warsaw, Tilsit, Toronto, Kiev and Brooklyn, and they are all poignantly captioned 'Do you recognise?' As I click on the thumbnails, the photographs swell and enlarge, filling the screen. I am a witness to countless forgotten moments in photographers' studios, and on beaches, at wedding breakfasts and family parties. Weirdly, it is I who feel like a ghost, haunting these unknown pasts. I feel slightly

embarrassed as I scrutinise them, conscious that, after a while, I am not seeing them anymore as individuals but as a collection of physical attributes: waxed moustaches, ample bosoms, beaky noses. One family of little boys with alarmingly prominent ears reminds me that not even names are enough to save us from oblivion. It is captioned 'Canada: David (12 years); Jack (10 years); Max (8 years); David (7 years)—Who are these boys?'.

I guess the Net is subject to the same kind of fantasies that we impose on archives: the dream that somehow, everything we ever wanted to know, everything that has been lost, is out there somewhere, waiting to be found, if we just know where to look. You can understand why: the Net is so boundless, and computers make it all so easy. Clearly, I am not immune from the seductions of this fantasy myself. On the back of the photograph of my grandfather and the young man, which is printed like a postcard, it says 'Gale's Studios Ltd., Branches everywhere.' I only have to click a few icons on my computer to discover that Gale's was an English photographic studio, so the picture must have been taken in 1922 during the three weeks my grandfather and his family spent in Liverpool, staying with relatives whilst waiting to take ship for Australia.

The same search delivers me a 1922 Liverpool trade directory, which lists a branch of Gale's Studio at 29 London Road, Liverpool. GoogleMap tells me that London Road is a major thoroughfare, and that No 29 lies on the corner of London Road and Hotham St. I can convert this map to a satellite image, which allows me to zoom in on that corner. I count two chimney pots on the roof of No 29, and I see that the satellite has captured a small green sedan, a bus and a juggernaut travelling down London Road. In the garden across the street, a red sedan is parked under the leafy summer trees. I find that I have been staring at this image for a long time, as though all of this specificity might be enough to yield up the past as well: as though, if I were to look carefully enough, I might just glimpse those two men in their suits as they emerge out of the front of the building and pause, dazzled by the unexpected light, before they turn right and begin to walk slowly up the street, in the direction of St Vincent St and further down London Road until they disappear beyond the bounds of the map.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anne Brennan.